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Teaching Philosophy

“The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.”

-bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (1994)

I read hooks' book many years ago during my master's study, just at the start of my teaching career. This passage stood out, but I don't think I understood the depth of it at the time. It stayed with me, though, and it has grown to represent the core of how I think about my teaching.

I study issues of race and diversity. For me, as a white man, to be a responsible scholar in this area, I need to recognize the politics of power in many aspects within, and outside of, my life in the academy. I have participated in informal anti-racist trainings in the past, and I was aware of how my position was a problematic one from which to proclaim authority about the effects of racism on people of color. I've learned that most helpful tool here is humility. But in order to take hooks seriously, in the classroom, I need to deal with the tension that exists between humility and the necessary position of authority as teacher. Authority is fundamental to the learning process; how do we suggest the importance of knowledge acquisition, without models to strive towards? But how can I offer a diverse and open classroom environment so that my students might approach the knowledge in their own manner, and push them to apply it in their own lives? In short, how do I treat the classroom as a space of radical possibilities, while recognizing the politics of authority?

In the Race and Communication class I teach at NC State, I bridge this tension by asking my student to give 'reports' at the start of every class. These reports were my students' chance to reflect on moments, events, and thoughts from their daily lives about race. I made it clear this was a chance for conversation. Using the skills I've gained in anti-racist training courses, I provide my students with a stage to engage each other in productive ways, while also recognizing my authority to step in before the conversation become unproductive, that is, counter to the idea of sparking more possibilities for learning. This is not to say that emotional reactions were forbidden or foreclosed upon; emotional reactions are valuable to address the complexity of ways race functions.

If I want my students to be critical and aware in their work and in their lives, I need to demonstrate that in my role as professor. In the media production classes I teach, it might be something as small as checking in with my students at the beginning of every class, asking them how they are feeling about their work. In order to teach critical engagement, I must do more than lecture on it. This is the heart of negotiating the humility/authority divide. I want to demonstrate a critical awareness that is conscious and careful with its authority and doesn't cease to ask questions and move toward new possibilities.

hooks' challenge works to negate the idea that the classroom or the teacher are neutral. When I begin a class at the start of a semester, I speak about my feelings, positions, and reason for engagement with the class material. I state that I will never punish my students for expressing different or contrary views to my own. And if they ever feel as though I have, I tell them, please let me know. However, I emphasize that challenging our views and expanding our critical thought is the goal of our work in the class. This is admittedly hazy line between emphasizing critical thought and recognizing a diversity of views, and I don't always get it right. But I feel comfortable enough coming to my students and acknowledging my mistakes, upon reflection, and I believe this encourages them to do the same.